



unlock your heart

A woman's best friend is her siddur.

Think about that line for a moment, then tick the box that applies to you:

- Always.
- Um... pass.
- When I get an hour alone in the house, yes.
- I recall a few specific occasions, at the Kosel and Kever Rochel, when I davened and felt like a load had been lifted from me. I'd love to get to that place on a regular basis.
- I don't have a head to concentrate, and then I close my siddur feeling guilty.
- When I was a teen, I davened three times a day. I've been going through a lot recently and can't relate to the words anymore.
- Honestly, if I really open myself up during tefillah, I feel scared. Like, I'm offering Hashem my heart, and I don't know what His response will be.

The tattered siddur, pages worn with tears, is a legend. Beloved tool of connection between every woman and her Father in Heaven, constant companion through the meandering path of life.

But when we look closely, our relationship with tefillah can be uneasy. When Penimi, an educational organization, started to examine women's relationship with tefillah, we uncovered ambivalence, disappointment, yearning.

"I wish I'd finish davening feeling like I've just had a long schmooze with my best friend," one woman said, "feeling understood and refreshed, like I can cope with life again."

Is a siddur a woman's best friend? It can be. We want it to be. We want to close our siddurim with serenity. Rejuvenated, energized, comforted. How often does that happen?

What are the barriers keeping that from happening?

Is it the messages we receive from a Western, results-based society? Is something lacking in our *chinuch*? Is it deep pain that's locking up our hearts? Are we relying on immature conceptions of tefillah that need a refresh?

This is an Elul like none other. For half a year our lives have been overturned. It's taken a steep toll. We've had to dig in deep and meet ourselves and our loved ones in places we thought we had grown past. We may be angry, stressed, and overwhelmed at the thought of the approaching Yamim Noraim.

It's Chodesh Elul. The King is in the field. He's absolutely approachable. It's an *eis ratzon*.

But many of us feel like the strings have come loose. Something in our hearts or in our relationship isn't where it should be. Over the next few weeks, *Family First* is joining with Penimi to embark on a candid analysis of the relationship of women and tefillah. Let's uncover some of the barriers holding us back from reaching for our siddur — and try to overcome them so we can approach our Father as the beloved children we are.



Part I

Barrier One:
If You Only Daven Hard Enough...

It's the classic end to innumerable high school classes: If you only daven hard enough, Hashem will grant your tefillos. A variation on the theme is the image of a great measuring cup in Heaven, filled by tefillos, waiting to spill over, and thus our requests will be granted.

We take in all these messages – and they do contain a truth. But while we may know that tefillah is about a relationship, not a Heavenly ATM mechanism, too often, we're left with the message: Just daven, daven, daven.

And then what happens?

We're passed over for the job. Another buyer makes a better offer on the house. Shidduch after shidduch after shidduch. Empty arms and aching hearts. Illness. Pain.

We daven harder. We daven with a sense of desperation. If only I can get it right, I might hit that magic button. We daven hoping frantically to control our future.

At a certain point, our siddur ceases to be a sanctuary. We may feel bitter, or disillusioned, or even betrayed. I did everything right. I davened and davened and davened. And all I received was deafening silence.

Rosh Hashanah is approaching. We know Elul is the time to return to Hashem through tefillah. But there's a barrier in place, drying up our words before we can even form them.

Open Hearts

The question comes from girls with a more philosophical bent, who are grappling with some kind of issue. They approach after class, or call on the phone and wonder aloud: Is tefillah *bitachon* or *hishtadlus*?

These girls with eyes that are half defiant, half shrouded in pain, are saying, I know what works in school: work harder and work smarter. And then – results. If tefillah is classified as *hishtadlus*, then daven harder, daven smarter, and I've got a way of controlling my life. Instead of living in an uncertain world that's governed by a G-d Whose plan doesn't seem to involve roses and rainbows, I'll live in a world I can control through spiritual *hishtadlus*.

Their underlying request – please, show me how I can use tefillah to wrest control away from G-d and put my own plan into

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play – may seem extreme. It's present, just a little, in each and every one of us.

And with Rosh Hashanah approaching, it becomes oh, so relevant.

We may be sophisticated enough not to come to Hashem with a shopping list, but beneath our tefillos, there's the sense that I have to daven my hardest so that...

All the things we want are doubtless from Him. We want *hatzlachah* and good children, *parnassah*, and a *shidduch*. But those requests are also about me implementing my ideas of what I'd like my life to look like. Tefillah, though, is something much deeper and fundamental.

Let's read the words of the *Chovos Halevavos*:

Know, brother, that our aim in tefillah is to express the longing of the soul to Hashem, its submission before Him, elevating its Creator, praising and thanking His Name, and casting all of its needs and its hope upon Him... Our Sages arranged a nusach that shows man his need for Hashem and to acknowledge his dependence upon Him.

All of us have a belief system. For some, it's science, for others, politics. Some of us lean on psychology or self-help or simply cling to the premise that if we try hard enough, we'll meet success. Most of us believe in a mixture of all these.

The last months have shown us that so much of what we believe in can crumble. Politicians stumble. Doctors admit their limitations. Jobs we relied on were snatched away. Bewilderment reigned. Robbed of their belief systems, people walked in the shadows.

Tefillah issues a challenge: Will you put your life in the hands of Hashem – or in the chaos of so-called fate? Will you turn to Hashem and acknowledge that He is running the show?

All the acts of daily living conspire, asking us to forget this truth. In business, we figure out marketing strategies. At home, we fill our parenting toolbox. When Plan A falls through, we reach for Plan B and start formulating Plan C. All of this is good and necessary. Hashem has put us here in the world to live our best life. Still, we're being asked to perform a minute-by-minute paradox: to engage fully in this world, but never to forget the truth of our utter dependence on Hashem.

So how can we put in all our effort while maintaining our dependence on Hashem?

OPEN EYES

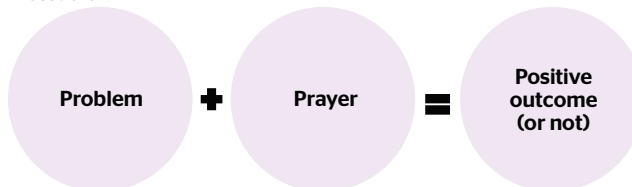
Have you ever been to a very wise rav, someone with *ha'aras panim* who is a true *baal eitza*? You ask your question, and it seems quite simple, there's either this solution or that one. But suddenly, he blows you out of the water with a totally different angle, things you never thought about that are far more important than you ever dreamed?

Close your eyes. Remember being in such a situation. Think of the knot in your stomach that suddenly eases. The surprise, the relief, the clarity.

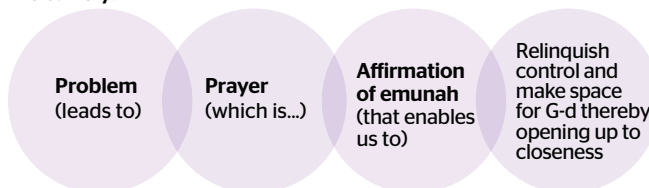
We relinquish control. That doesn't mean we don't care. It doesn't mean we can't bring our problem before Hashem in tefillah. It's the knowledge and the serenity that comes when we're conscious that *all runs according to the most mind-bendingly complex and exquisitely simple plan.*

CHANGE THE PRAYER PARADIGM

Instead of:



We can try:



Tefillah. Tefillah is the mechanism by which we internalize: This is where it all comes from. You want health? Exercise. Improve your diet. But don't make your lifestyle into a deity. Health is a precious gift from Me to you, each day anew. You need parnassah? Of course, I want You to have a *shefa* of brachah. But don't just rely on the paycheck. Turn to Me, because I am the source of all. What about inner peace? Turn to Me for that, too. Because everything else is an illusion.

Three times a day, man is enjoined to stop everything he's doing — the rush and the plans and ceaseless *hishtadlus* — and listen to the whisper of his soul: Reconnect to the Source of all. To the hope. To the inner reality of the world, which is that Hashem is in charge, and all follows His plan.

We'd like to close our siddurim feeling a sense of recharge and calm. When tefillah is an effort to control, then it's exhausting, draining, and something that gets pushed off until we can no longer avoid it.

True tefillah allows us to loosen the emotional stranglehold. Gain perspective. Hashem is the Source of all. I don't have to hold so tight. Tefillah is *emunah* in practice. It's our daily exhale.

When we learn to let go of results-driven tefillah, we can open up to the idea of tefillah being a connection. And it is this connection with Hashem that will sustain me, energize me, and comfort me. **It's not asking that gets me what I want, it's being in the state of asking that helps me to become a vessel for Hashem's gifts.**

3 Steps to Serenity

1. Recognize that He's the only source we can rely on.
2. Relinquish control to let Hashem in the picture.
3. Know that Hashem is with me in the smallness of my inadequacies.

OPEN LIPS

Baruch Atah — Blessed are You.

You.

You, the Source of all goodness, the Source of life itself, the reason why I stand here, breathing, thinking, thanking, asking this very second.

You, Who gave me a mitzvah to turn to You, to connect. Little me, talking to

You, in Your omnipotence and kindness and sanctity and compassion.

You, Who gave me this heartache so I can turn to You and find not just succor for this challenge, but reignite the inner meaning of my life.

You, Who are always at the center of the picture, though sometimes it's hard to see.

You, Who are handing me this challenge, this day, so I remember to reach out and hold on tight and find the humility to remember that my life's path is dictated by...

You.

Baruch Atah.